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PROGRAM Good Morning, America

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SUBJECT Zelnick Reports on Selection of Andropov

STEVE BELL: As we said, a day after the Soviet Union announced the death of President Brezhnev, the Kremlin has selected his replacement. While thousands of Soviet soldiers filed past Brezhnev's casket today, the Communist Party leadership was busy selecting former KGB chief Yuri Andropov as the Secretary-General of the Soviet Communist Party. No word yet on whether he'll also take over Brezhnev's other role as President.

More on Andropov from Bob Zelnick in Moscow.

BOB ZELNICK: Andropov is 68 years old. He is regarded by Western diplomats as an able and intelligent man, fluent in English. He was also a patron of the U. S. A./Canada Institute and its head, Georgi Arbatov.

He may be more prone to experiment, economically and in other ways, than any other senior member of the Politburo. He did head the KGB beginning in 1967, but those who are students of the Soviet Union say he was named to that post because the Communist Party wanted to get rid of a loose cannon. It wanted somebody who reflected the party view controlling the secret police of the Soviet Union.

It should also be noted that while KGB chief, he effectively stamped out the dissident movement. However, there are members and former members of the dissident community who feel that, behind this tough facade, there lurks the soul of a real civil libertarian, at least in Soviet terms.

BELL: Robert Zelnick in Moscow this morning.

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-2-

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BELL: There's a new man on top at the Kremlin today. Less than three days after the death of Leonid Brezhnev, former KGB chief Yuri Andropov has been elected chief of the Soviet Communist Party; that, of course, the principal power position in the Soviet Union. It's not known yet whether Andropov will also have Brezhnev's largely ceremonial title of President.

More from Bob Zelnick in Moscow.

ZELNICK: The 68 year old former diplomat and KGB chief is considered by Western diplomats as by far the most able among senior Politburo figures. Fluent in English, polished and urbane, he has a varied background. As a diplomat, he was Soviet Ambassador to Hungary at the time of the 1956 revolt and Soviet invasion. He was named to head the KGB in 1967, the appointment reflecting the desire of the Communist Party to control an agency which had become a loose cannon.

As KGB chief, he ran the crackdown on Soviet dissidents and refuseniks, but also made friends with several dissidents who regard him as a relatively liberal fellow, at least in Soviet terms. It is not known whether today's release of Lech Walesa by Polish authorities was coordinated with Andropov.

Andropov was elected to the Politburo in 1973. This March he relinquished his KGB post to join the Politburo's steering committee. He is known as a strong supporter of detente, which he described in 1975 as "a continuous process which demands constant movement forward." But there is no sense that as a veteran communist, he intends to change Soviet policies on internal dissent, Eastern Europe, Third World wars of national liberation, or other matters that have recently fractured East-West relations.

Today's quick Central Committee action, particularly in light of the fact that Andropov was nominated by Konstantin Chernenko, the other leading contender, clearly reflects the perceived need for continuity on the part of Soviet authorities. In all probability, it also reflects the real division of power during the last months of Leonid Brezhnev's life.

Bob Zelnick, ABC News, Moscow.

BELL: Kremlin watchers, of course, have been keeping a close eye on Yuri Andropov since he was elevated to the Soviet Politburo last May. Barrie Dunsmore [is] at the State Department this morning. And Barrie, what do U. S. officials have to say about this man on top at the Kremlin?

-3-

BARRIE DUNSMORE: Well, Steve, of all of the known candidates, Yuri Andropov probably would have been Washington's choice, although that should not be taken as an endorsement. But men like Viktor Grishin were considered real hardliners, and Chernenko looked as though he might be weak, so he was no bargain.

There are some negative feelings about Andropov. Referring to his years at the KGB, one senator said yesterday it would be like having J. Edgar Hoover become President here.

The solid Kremlinologists in this country appear to respect Andropov. They say that on most issues over the years he has come firmly down in the center. And it's considered a plus that he appears to have had the early backing of both Foreign Minister Gromyko and Defense Minister Ustinov. Some people are impressed that he has a sophisticated veneer, speaks English, likes French wines, and so on. Perhaps the most positive aspect of that part of his image is that a man with world experience may not be quite as narrow in his views as some of the old Bolsheviks.

However, Andropov is also known to be tough. You don't head the KGB for 15 years as Mr. Nice Guy. At the same time, several analysts feel that with any strong and healthy Soviet leader, there are now real chances to begin to improve U. S.-Soviet relations.

Steve?

BELL: Thank you, Barrie.

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[Please note: The above two reports by Bob Zelnick were broadcast at 7:30 and 8:00 AM. A third report at 8:30 is identical to that broadcast at 8:00.]